

are sold. However, if only some or no shares are bid on, then the auction may be set up such that no shares are actually sold at all (e.g., no investors' accounts are debited or no credit cards charged), or if the shares are sold, then they may be refunded (less any administrative or legal or handling fees) after the auction is over. Alternatively or in addition, if the second threshold is not reached, but money has already been collected for selling some shares, then the excess raised funds may be distributed evenly among (or commensurate with) all shares sold, possibly including those sold to meet the first threshold, minus any administrative or legal or handling fees. Of course, any of the features or methods discussed with respect to the first threshold may apply to reaching (or not reaching) any following thresholds.

**[0045]** In the case where excess funds beyond the second threshold (or beyond what is needed to reach the second threshold, including excess revenue from exceeding the first threshold) are raised, these funds may remain in an escrow account for use for any expenses over and above what is covered by reaching the second threshold. For example, some patent applications are more costly to draft and prosecute than others, or require more claims (which cost more money), in which case having additional funds available is beneficial. Or, these excess funds (or at least part of them) may be given to the inventor (because it was the inventor's share in the invention that was ultimately being sold to raise sufficient revenue to patent the invention) and/or the company (who brokers the transaction and provides the inventor the medium and opportunity to sell his idea), and/or the investors (although the investors are, in principle, paying market value for their shares, so distributing a non-profit excess to them might be economically inefficient). For those funds that are paid to the inventor, they may be held in escrow for a predetermined amount of time or at least until certain events occur. (These funds may be used at least in part for a sort of emergency or contingency fund to be used by the company for unexpected or excessive legal or government fees related to obtaining or maintaining the enforceability of a patent. Such a fund is discussed later.) For example, an inventor who fraudulently steals another's invention, and is able to through the present method to reach both thresholds and attain an excess, should not be able to enjoy that excess. However, it is often difficult to know whether a patent will hold up in court, or will be declared invalid or unenforceable due to inventor fraud, until far in the future, and often only when an expensive, high-powered attorney team fighting the patent in litigation discovers this information. By then, if the inventor is paid along the way, these excesses may have already been spent and enjoyed by the faux inventor. To prevent this (or at least reduce the likelihood of this), and thus to encourage investor confidence in the marketplace herein proposed, the excess funds raised, as well as any excess funds raised by the inventor selling her shares (up to a maximum allowed share size), may be kept in escrow (such as interest-bearing accounts, real estate, stocks, bonds, or other assets that grow with time) for a predetermined time, such as 1 year, 3 years, 5 years, or a predetermined event, such as a patent issuing, a significant license agreement entered into, a patent infringement litigation outcome, and so forth.

**[0046]** The present invention may utilize one or more thresholds. For example, a single all-or-nothing threshold may be used (e.g., set at around \$10,000 or more), such that those inventions that reach the single threshold have patent applications drafted and submitted. The single threshold may

include some, all, or other services than those previously mentioned. A lower threshold (such as \$3000) may allow a very inexpensive patent application to be drafted and submitted, with no prior art search, and no funds available for prosecution or issuance. However, the inventor may be contractually obligated to pay for such fees and services, or the funds may come from other sources, when the time for these fees arises. An advantage to such a scenario is that fewer funds need be raised to begin the process of patenting inventions. However, investors may be less likely to invest in inventions that have not been professionally searched or for which a patent application is drafted by a "budget" patent attorney, or for an invention that is patent pending but for which no funds are available to prosecute to issuance.

**[0047]** One possible manifestation of the present invention could use three thresholds: one for submitting a provisional patent application, a second for searching prior art to the invention (and/or other related services), and a third for obtaining a patent, although a user of the present invention may utilize only one or two of these thresholds, or may combine some of the services suggested for reaching one threshold with meeting another threshold (such as contacting the inventor and getting further information after reaching the first threshold instead of the second, etc.). Further, more than three thresholds could be established, with the meeting of each threshold corresponding to a certain set of services performed, and corresponding to a certain amount of revenue raised. (Again, the threshold may be a revenue raised, number of shares sold, a total size of shares sold, or any other threshold desired.) The inventor could opt to meet one or more of these thresholds on his own, such as the first two, and rely on the website only for reaching the final (and most costly or difficult) threshold. Or he may opt to meet the final threshold on his own if the first two are met, because this gives him valuable information as to the market value of his invention, and so forth.

**[0048]** Selling of shares of the invention may begin when an inventor has paid a submission fee for publication through the company, when an inventor has submitted his own funds for investment (and, for example, desires to skip over one or more of the thresholds, such as the threshold corresponding to the prior art search report), or when the inventor or the company deems sufficient market interest from a predetermined amount of preference indicators (such as "stars" that users may assign to their favorite inventions). Selling of shares of the invention may end when all thresholds have been reached, or when enough money is raised (by investors and/or by direct payment from the inventor) to be able to obtain a patent on the invention (with enough money to maintain the patent for a predetermined period of time), when enough money is raised as deemed by the inventor to determine sufficient market interest for independent investment by the inventor himself for the remaining amount necessary to reach the final threshold, or when auctions have finished and succeeded. For example, after reaching the second threshold above, selling of the shares by the company or inventor may end. Alternatively, the inventor may opt to sell additional shares in the invention for her own benefit, to obtain a monetary benefit up front. The following is one example of one possibility according to the present invention.

**[0049]** Herein, the phrases "first threshold," "second threshold," etc., are used to generically demarcate thresholds at which various services may be performed. Alternatively or in addition, thresholds could be known as a provisional